



## Review of 'Desert America. Territory of Paradox'

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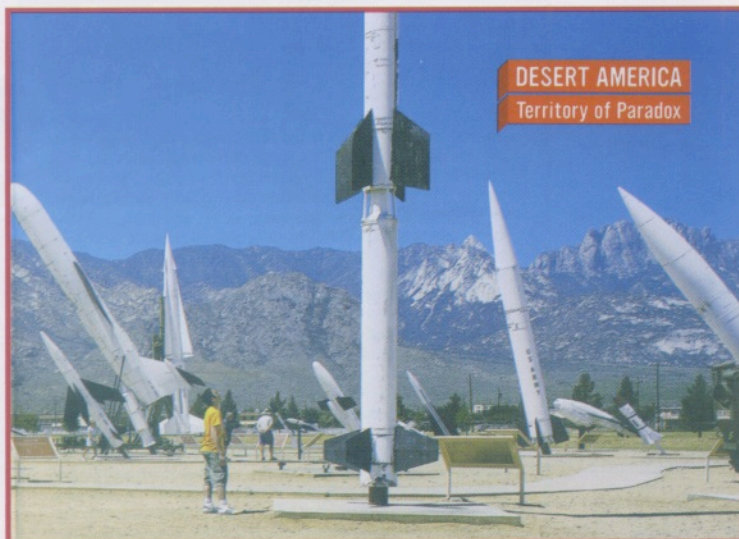
## DESERT AMERICA: TERRITORY OF PARADOX

Edited by Ramon Prat, Michael Kubo,  
Irene Hwang, Jaime Salazar

The French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard has described the American desert as "the vanishing point of culture." Was he thinking of Las Vegas when he wrote those words: that neon mirage that reveals more about our "society of the spectacle" than any other urban condition? The ephemeral pleasures of "The Strip" could only exist surrounded by a halo of desert wilderness, to filter out all sense of reality.

"Desert America" takes us on a unique and revealing cultural road trip to such places as Las Vegas, RV parks, a vast aeroplane "boneyard" in Arizona, missile testing zones, an instant city and an abandoned town turned into a "mock-up" war zone. Uncovering and exploring these transgressive and bizarre desert landscapes is what this book is all about. Inspired in part by Reyner Banham's "Scenes in America Deserta", it uses maps, satellite images, essays, historical records and powerful photography to track a fragmentary trajectory across several of America's deserts. It is framed into seven distinct episodes: Promised Lands, The Elements, Eden, Hostility, Other Worlds, Expansion, and Isolation.

Journeys into the desert have always been powerful metaphors for our spiritual quests. Like the silent and dusty figure of Travis in Wim Wender's "Paris Texas" walking the rail lines, or John Wayne in that famous image in John Ford's "The Searchers", the American desert has always beckoned the wanderer. From the first colonisers to "Go West", the Mormons in their biblical search for the New Jerusalem, or the cyclical flocking of aging "Snowbirds" in their RV's to the warmer climes of Arizona, many have traversed the desert in the hope of



finding something there. Migration and temporary settlement have always been part of the desert's narrative.

To imagine these landscapes as empty—as many of the first Europeans did—is to ignore a fundamental relationship between the indigenous tribes and their territory. The exodus of 19th century settlers pouring across these regions from the east coast of America, displaced, evacuated and marginalized entire long-standing populations into "caged" reservations, breaking their natural bond with their land. Now this tragic history has been ruthlessly caricatured and sold as cheap tourist commodities. Drive through the Navajo Nation in Arizona (or any other of the many reservations) and you will soon see the abject poverty of these settlements. Even the harshness of the desert environment cannot blur this stark social injustice.

Issues of immigration continue to

haunt the desert. The US border with Mexico contains several extreme desert sections with soaring temperatures. While almost 1 million Mexicans cross the 61 border points daily, there is an ever-increasing number trying to cross illegally. With the desert areas the least patrolled—due to the extreme conditions—and even with the many water stations left by humanitarian organisations, there are still over 500 deaths a year of people unable to carry enough water to survive their desperate bid for a better life.

The natural forces of the desert, though physically punishing to our bodies, can be utilised in positive ways. While failed attempts to redirect the Colorado River have resulted in environmental disasters like the stagnating Salton Sea, the Hoover Dam project, and in turn large solar and wind power developments have transformed these hostile conditions into useful energy. Without the power generated by the Hoover Dam, Las Vegas would not burn as bright against the desert sky.

Las Vegas—of which so much has already been written—"delirious with excess", is captured in the super-realist photographs showing the gilded interiors of "The Venetian" and the hyper-efficient service yards lurking behind the glitz. Its baroque extravagance is best symbolized by Liberace who liked to wonder up to the top floor of his hotel with cocktails to watch the display of missile testing in the desert. Victim of his own excess, the "toxic shock" of all the dry cleaning chemicals needed to maintain his costumes, eventually poisoned his body.

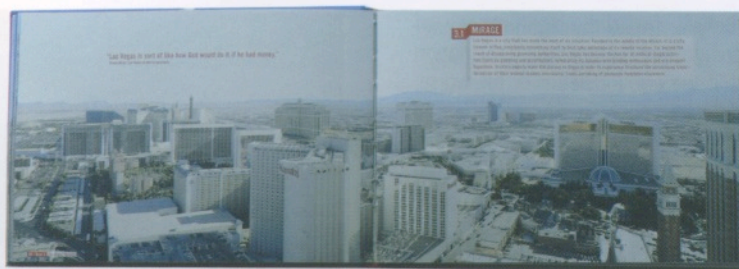




► But what architecture has the desert spawned? Albert Frey, Richard Neutra and John Lautner have all searched for a "Desert Modernism". But the desert has burned up a few dreams. Paulo Soleri has tried relatively unsuccessfully to build his ideal community of Arcosanti in the high desert of Arizona. A few clumsy fragments of "arcology" - created by waves of volunteer labour and funded by the sale of his hand-made bells-stand isolated amidst the stark beauty of the desert. Other utopian enterprises such as the Biosphere in Arizona -funded by a Texan oil magnet- have also failed in the face of human frailty or the intervention of unexpected realities.

Set against these desert dreams, is the sheer force of American urban development -even in the desert. Phoenix has become a boundless city, close to the imaginary "Broadacre City". But if you have ever tried to navigate your way through its inescapable grid of blandness you will be left wondering what alternative directions a desert urbanism might take? Instead "Leisure Space" and gated retirement communities proliferate and blossom in the desert, "protected by a malevolent ring of golf courses... acres of lush putting greens... under the blinding desert sun."

The militarization of the desert is "the dark side of paradise." Playas in New Mexico is a case in point. Built in 1972 for copper smelting, by 1999 it was no longer viable. Turned now into an "anti-terrorism training facility... complete with suicide bombers", the 260 abandoned homes have a new urban value as the "ultimate war simulator." The desert is home to some of the most destructive technology in the world.



White Sands Missile range covers an area of 3200 square miles of Chihuahuan Desert and has been the site of more than 45 000 missile tests. But as well as peppering the desert with large blast craters, deep under its skin is another time bomb: stored nuclear waste that needs 10 000 years of protection. The "Cold War" and its theory of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) have left a fascinating trail for "atomic tourists". But if this is not for you, then there is always "Gun City": 550 acres "dedicated to the 2nd Amendment". This "gun resort" is just 50 miles outside Las Vegas where you can enjoy the "combat mindset", "relax" at one of the 12 shooting ranges or spend your days absorbing the cultural intricacies of the gunsmithing factory.

In welcome contrast to all this "guns and golf" is the hippie "Burning Man Festival" at Black Rock Desert. The ultimate instant "city of love", it takes place each year over a week, and is

an unashamed "orgy of desert self-expression". Laid out in a perfect circular plan -that converges on the "Burning Man"- this experimental community of over 30 000 people leave no trace of their habitation when the event is concluded with their motto of "MOOP" (matter out of place).

NASA training zones, huge radio telescopes and observatories that look out to distant galaxies, robot testing tracks and the original London Bridge "beached" at an artificial lake in Nevada, are some of the many other places explored in this book.

The double page format opens up like a windscreen view of our voyage into the vastness of the horizon. Perfectly balancing superb photographs with facts and careful research that lay bare the desert's contradictions, our gaze is taken away from the individual architectural object, to experience a journey through the heartland of social realities and material landscapes that form "Desert America".

While the American desert may be an unusual condition for an architecture book to explore, this beautifully produced and innovative book passionately guides us there in order to look over the edge, and see for ourselves "the vanishing point of culture". ●

Paul Clarke

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